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Summary:

Exactly one year and two months before Will Byers went missing, Steve Harrington got involved with his older brother.

1. The Start

September, 1982

Sophomore Year

Steve Harrington swung open his locker, which he had jammed with a pencil so he wouldn't have to waste time putting in the combination, and deftly grabbed his Algebra II textbook with one hand. As he turned to stuff it into his backpack, he noticed some type of fluttering in his peripheral.

A tiny slip of folded notebook paper gracefully twirled from his locker to the floor, where it slid for a few inches before coming to a stop. Steve blinked at it for a moment before a mischievous grin spread over his face and he bent down to retrieve it.

Languidly, he scanned the hallway, trying to seek out obvious signs of a spying secret admirer. But alas, there were no shy brunettes side-eying him from behind their binders, or cute blondes giggling from behind their hands.

Even though Steve couldn't spot anyone in his immediate vicinity, he decided to give any potential onlookers a show, and began by swooping back his poofy hair with his fingers (so that it feel over his forehead in neatly tousled strands). Then, he subtly - or in a way he thought was subtly - flexed his arms as he raised them up to stretch, before he leaned back against the lockers and relaxed.

He took his time, chewing his gum and casually passing the note from one hand to the other, until he finally decided that enough was enough.

He flipped it open and squinted at the handwriting.

It was quite possibly the most ominous message Steve Harrington had ever received in his life. Instantly, he felt his blood run cold and simultaneously rush with white hot fear. His heart rate spiked to a thousand beats per minute. He whipped his head around to his left, and then to his right, to find kids milling about - but again found none who seemed to be the culprit.

Whoever slipped him this horrendous note was most likely long gone.

He slowly turned his head back to that scrap of paper, and read it, re-read it, and re-read it again. It was just five little words, and they could've meant anything. But deep down, he knew all too well exactly what they were implying.

I know what you are.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, pulse thundering in his ears like drums in a philharmonic orchestra. He took a moment to breathe. *In… and out. In… and out, Harrington.* He swallowed around the massive lump in his throat and blinked down at the five unholy words one last time.

But he had been so careful...

With hands only slightly shaking, he folded the slip up until it was a tiny square wad, and tucked it neatly between *"Proficiency in Biology: A Comprehensive Text"* and *"Health for the Adolescent"* .

He straightened up, breathed out one more time, and just like that, elected to ignore it.

It was probably just some bullshit anyway. He was just overthinking it. Blowing it out of proportion. It was nothing. Some dumb cryptic shit someone meant to dump in someone else's locker, not his.

Steve slammed the metal door shut with a satisfying crash. He took note that the hallway was almost completely clear of kids by now, and half walked, half jogged to his math class - slipping through the door just as the bell rang. He shot the teacher a charming smile as he took his seat.

Nothing to worry about.

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A whole week passed, and Steve Harrington was doing great.

He was excelling in baseball, his sport of choice. He'd passed by a group of girls and scored three of their numbers. And, he'd managed to pull an impressive B- on his last English essay.

But, of course, something always had to ruin it.

He didn't know how he managed to sense some type of bullshit was about to happen, but as he pushed up the lever to his locker, he got this weird, nauseating feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was like something animals get right before it storms.

Steve gulped down the dread. As he pulled open the door, his eyes immediately found a second scrap resting between his extra pencil case and a protein bar.

Shit.
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Steve exhaled a slow, shaky breath, and locked his eyes forward. He slid his Health text from its place between all the other books and turned to primp himself in the mirror he had hung on the inside of his locker door.

The note remained neatly folded and untouched.

He ran a hand through his hair, checked his teeth, and inspected his fingernails.

He wasn't even thinking about it. Didn't even care. Not even a little bit. Not. One. Bit.

Steve shut his locker door and hiked a backpack strap over one shoulder, before he casually began walking to his 6th period.

It only took him ten steps before he turned on his heel, stamped back to his locker, threw open the door, and grabbed the note.

Steve bit the inside of his cheek to keep from screaming.

What did they even *want?*

It vaguely sounded like whoever it was had challenged him to some sort of fight -- but if that were true, then why wouldn't they just say so?

Steve huffed and grit his teeth, before he crumpled up the note with one hand and dropped it at the bottom of his locker, slamming the door after it.

It was bad enough that they were claiming to have life-ruining dirt on him, but now they were demanding a meeting?

He trudged to his class, the soles of his shoes squeaking against the tile floor.

Obviously, he was gonna ignore this dumbass request. It was a waste of time. Whoever it was didn't know shit and was just trying to get a rise out of him.

He couldn't even imagine what this little rendezvous would be for. But it was a good thing that it didn't matter to him whatsoever, because Steve Harrington was cool, and cool kids don't get worked up over stupid shit like this.

Mind you, the reason he was so opposed to going over there wasn't because he was *scared.* Steve Harrington just had better things to do with his time.

Steve didn't even care if whoever wrote that note *thought* he was scared, because he was absolutely positive that he *wasn't.*

Steve Harrington was no coward.

In fact, he decided he was going to make an appearance under the bleachers after school today, to show *exactly* how not scared he was.

Steve wiped his clammy hands over his tight jeans.

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Steve tapped his pencil against his desk, eyes locked on the clock as
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the second hand creeped along at a glacial pace.

Tick, tick, tick.

He bounced his knee, filled with restless energy. While he was aware the teacher was saying something in the final few minutes of class, every word went in one ear and out the other.

The final bell rang its shrill cry to signal the end of instruction for the day.

Around Steve, kids shuffled to gather their belongings and chatted lightly to each other. A girl laughed at something her friend said as they filtered out of the class.

Steve tried to swallow past a sudden, acute case of drymouth. He stood up, neatly packed away his notebook and textbook into his backpack, and walked out.

He took his time getting to the bleachers, lingering at his locker for more than a few minutes and pausing in the hallway to chat up Susan from his English class.

Eventually, he found himself outside, approaching the macabre meeting spot. With each step, he became more and more aware of the churning in his stomach.

The sports field outside his high school was kind of… humble, to say in the least, but it got the job done. On most days, unless there was the sporadic scheduled practice, the place was completely deserted. Steve thanked his lucky stars that that was the case today.

There was only one set of stands at the very far end of the field, and it could only hold a few dozen people at most. Steve stopped in front of it.

He took one last deep breath, closing his eyes as he exhaled, and ducked under the bleachers.

Steve squinted as he took in his surroundings, immediately spotting a figure in the dim light. He took a few forced-nonchalant steps closer before he came to a stop.

Standing before him, hands stuffed in his pockets and eyes locked on the ground, was none other than Jonathan Byers.

Steve's eyebrow quirked in confusion.

He had never done *shit* to Jonathan Byers.

He'd never body-checked him with his shoulder in the hallway. He'd never dunked his head in the toilet during passing period. He'd never cough-whispered insults at him as he'd walked past Steve's desk to sharpen his pencil.

Sure, they weren't friends, not even really acquaintances, even though they'd had just about every class together since freshman year. But Steve had never gone out of his way to give him a hard time.

He'd never tried to put a stop to the torment, either, but that wasn't really any of his business.

Maybe the fact that Byers didn't really hang out with a select group of people in the lunchroom and kind of tended to be alone made him an easy target for assholes.

He was just one of those shy, quiet types. You know the ones. He kept to himself, which was perfectly fine with Steve.

So bear with Steve for wondering how this was the guy who claimed to know one of his dirty little secrets.

Maybe whoever Steve was supposed to meet with had gotten fed up and left, considering he'd taken about fifteen extra minutes to get his ass over there.

Maybe Jonathan just happened to be there to light up a joint and Steve had rudely interrupted him. The phrase "under the bleachers" was kind of known to be code for a prime weedsmoking spot, since it wasn't often patrolled by the sole security guard the school had and, of course, featured proper ventilation.

And no offense to Byers, but he did kinda seem to be the stoner type.

Steve broke the silence by clearing his throat and speaking. “Hey, Jonathan,” he said, as if they were waiting for the bus and not huddled up under some rusty folding stands.

“You’re gay,” Jonathan said, by way of reply.

Steve felt a jolt go through his entire body, as if he’d been tased. Too quickly, he forced out a loud, barking laugh. “What?” he asked, like he couldn’t believe his ears.

“I said that you’re gay,” Jonathan clarified in that meek voice of his, hands still buried in his pockets.

“No, I’m not,” Steve assured with an exaggerated eye roll. “Is that really why you called me out here?” he added lightly. He quietly wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans.

“I know I’m right,” Jonathan murmured, taking a step closer, causing Steve to take two back in response.

“No, you’re *not*,” Steve insisted vehemently. He planned his escape, already shuffling backwards to leave. “Look, Byers, as much as I enjoyed this little chat-”

“I found your *Blueboy* magazine.”

Steve froze, every nerve ending in his body screaming with shock. He was *well aware* of *exactly* the magazine Byers was referring too. And it meant he was in deep, deep shit.

A couple of months ago, Steve had been browsing the adult entertainment in the back section of his local comic book shop when he had spotted it. Before he could talk himself out of it, he had rolled it up, tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket, and hastily strode out of the store.

You could make no mistake on what the subject matter of that particular issue of *Blueboy* was.

First of all, the front cover displayed an image of a man clad only in red briefs reclining with an easy smile, his defined abdominals glistening and his thick, muscular arms stretched over his head.

The headlines proudly advertised contents of “Kinky Sex Tips for the Gay Man”, “HOT SHOTS on the Waterfront”, and, not to mention, a mouth-watering 16 page “Wet Section”.

Steve had cherished that magazine, had read through it over and over again, until the pages had started to curl.

He carried it with him at all times in his gym bag because, he reasoned (like a dumbass), no one would suspect he’d be keeping shit like that in with his dirty clothes. He wasn't gonna let it lay around at *home*, for fuck's sake. Then, second mistake, he had *lost* his gym bag (by leaving it somewhere and forgetting).

He’d recovered his bag in the Lost-and-Found about a week later, sin periodical. He had tried to assure himself that there was no possible way anyone could identify that it was his bag and, therefore, his magazine, *but he guessed he was wrong.*

Because Jonathan Byers had found it. And Steve was royally *fucked* now. If he decided to spread around the fact that Steve Harrington was a queer to other kids, they would make the rest of his high school career a living hell. He would fall from King Steve to Steve the Queen in no-seconds flat.

But that wasn’t what he was *really* afraid of. A little bullying he could handle. What scared the *shit* out of him was what would happen if his parents found out. Steve was convinced he‘d be kicked out and cut off, at the very least.

In the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, absolutely *no one* was gay. Or no one showed it, at least. And small towns like that were breeding grounds for intolerance. If word got out about Steve, he wouldn’t even be able to guarantee safety in his own neighborhood anymore.

Steve tried so hard to keep his voice even, to not let the panic show. “What do you want, Jonathan?”

Jonathan hesitated, opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it. He seemed to be really interested in a particular spot on the grass, because that was all he looked at.

Steve cut in with, “Money? Do you want money? I can get you money.” He was desperate, and now it was starting to become painfully obvious.

“No, I…” Byers started, trailing off.

Steve pressed, hysteric. “My mom has jewelry at home, I - I could bring you some of that, or pawn it for you, if you want, and bring you the cash?”

Byers shook his head, his hair flopping every which way.

Steve held his breath as Jonathan finally opened his mouth to speak.

“I just wanted to ask you something.”

“What?” Steve answered almost immediately, his heart pounding against his ribcage. Jonathan finally looked up from the floor and made eye contact with Steve. Rectangles of light from the slits in the seats above them fell over his face.

“Do you wanna kiss?” breathed Jonathan.

Steve short-circuited. “Do I want to *what?* ” he blurted.

“Kiss,” repeated Jonathan patiently.

Steve blinked at him for a long moment, brain completely fried. Before his mind could even catch up to what he was saying, the word was already out of his mouth: “Yeah.”

And Jonathan Byers just walked over to him and kissed him.

And Jesus fucking *Christ*, he had never been kissed like *that*.

And it wasn’t because Jonathan was some sort of spectacular kisser, either. Really, all the kiss boiled down to was a simple press of lips with minimal movement. But Steve didn’t expect his knees to go weak like that, didn’t expect that he’d have to grab at Jonathan’s shoulders to keep from falling over.

Maybe it was just because Jonathan was a *boy* and he was a *boy* and

this was something he'd been wanting since forever, but thought he could never have until he got the hell out of this damn town.

It was over way too soon. Jonathan pulled away first, and Steve immediately missed him. He took note of Jonathan's half-lidded eyes and heavy breaths and felt a weird sense of pride.

"I have to go pick up my little brother," Jonathan said softly, and Steve was surprised by how disappointed that made him. "Same time and place tomorrow?"

Steve was already nodding before the words could even fully register. "Yeah, tomorrow," he agreed.

"Don't be late this time," Jonathan chided, his words having no bite. And then he hiked up his backpack and left, leaving Steve alone under the bleachers, watching him go like a damned fool.

And that was how it started.

Notes for the Chapter:

> The Blueboy magazine description was actually based off the cover of the May '78 issue

2. Friends

Steve got into his car, drove home to an empty house, and kicked off his shoes once he got through the door.

He popped a TV dinner into the microwave and ate it as he attempted to finish a math practice problem set, the lull of the television providing background noise.

Once he got as far as he could on that, he showered, brushed his teeth, and dried his hair, like he always did. After, he padded from the bathroom to his bedroom and hit the hay, expecting to sleep like a baby.

But sleep did not come easy.

Steve lay awake in his bed for hours that night, staring at the ceiling, unable to turn his damn brain off.

Jonathan Byers, a boy, kissed him. He and Jonathan Byers kissed. He kissed a boy.

And he really, really liked it.

Steve watched the blades of his overhead fan go around, and around, and around.

Never before had he thought he'd be kissing *Byers,* of all people.

Sure, everyone in the school called Byers a queer - but Steve never took a moment to think that he actually *was* one.

Steve had never noticed anything particularly different about him, other than he was kinda quiet and antisocial. But then again, he'd never really made an effort to get to know him that well, either.

Maybe it was something that the other kids could just smell on him, like body odor. Or maybe they were just being malicious and happened to take a lucky guess. Still, it made Steve nervous, like he was next in line for them to figure out.

This kissing guys thing - it wasn't just something Steve thought about to himself anymore, something he let play over and over in his head when he was alone. It was something he'd *done*. It was a *memory* now.

And he felt so weird, like a thousand ants were crawling all over him, because now someone besides him *knew* .

Someone knew, *Jonathan Byers knew*, for sure, without any trace of doubt, that Steve Harrington was a queer. And it made him feel jittery and panicked, vulnerable in a way he had never even imagined.

Steve rolled over in his bed and went from staring at the ceiling to staring at the wall, covers pulled up to his nose. He shut his eyes and buried his face into his pillow, and waited, and waited, and waited for sleep.

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Steve Harrington spent the entirety of the next school day feeling like his throat was gonna close.

He was consumed by a weird mix of excitement and anxiety that manifested itself as uncontrollable restless energy.

He rapped his pencil against any spiral notebook he could find. He bounced his knee relentlessly. He tapped his fingers against his desk until the clicking of his nails got Mrs. Winston, the math teacher, to snap, "*Would you stop that?"*

But he really just couldn't help it.

Throughout the day, he tried his best to ignore Byers and all thoughts of Byers, but it was difficult when he was *always there*.

How had he not realized they had so many damn classes together? It seemed like every time Steve walked into a room after passing period, Byers was lying in wait to pop out of nowhere like some demented Jack-in-the-Box. Fuck.

He wondered if Byers was freaking out like he was, but everytime
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Steve caught himself sneaking a look at him, he just looked blank-faced and kind of bored.

Jesus. He was unreadable.

It took the final bell decades to ring. Steve gathered up all his shit in a hurry and was the first one out the door.

He stopped at his locker for a minute or two to trade out his stuff. While he was there, he spotted himself in the mirror on the back of his locker door.

Hastily, he grinned to check his teeth, and swiped his fingers through his bangs a few times before he asked himself why the hell he was trying to impress *Byers*.

He tentatively closed his locker. Steve Harrington didn't need to *try* to impress people.

In a matter of minutes, Steve was across the field and ducking under the stands again. He forcibly slowed his breathing, and pretended he hadn't just been running.

Even though Steve hauled ass to get to the bleachers, Jonathan had still gotten there before him.

Byers was standing in the same spot he was yesterday, hands again stuffed in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. Upon hearing Steve's entrance, he straightened up a bit and looked at him.

Steve slid on a lazy smile and tried his best to put a bit of swagger into his walk as he approached. He ran his fingers through his hair and desperately hoped he didn't look as nervous as he felt.

"Hey, Jonathan," Steve drawled. "Back for more, I see."

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow at him incredulously, and Steve cringed inwardly. He tried again.

"Ready for Round 2?" he added with a playful smirk.

Jonathan's eyes shifted from left to right before they landed back on

Steve. "... Are we gonna make out, or what?"

Disappointed that his devilish charms had no effect but delighted at the prospect of making out, Steve replied, "Yeah."

For the next few moments, they both just awkwardly stood there staring at each other, waiting for the other person to do something. Then, finally, Steve swooped down just as Jonathan leaned up, and they were kissing again.

Initially, their noses bumped, but in one fluid motion Steve tilted his head to the side to remedy that. He closed his eyes with a soft sigh.

Damn, Byers had the softest lips. It was like he had used chapstick every day of his life since he was born.

Steve moved his mouth against Jonathan's and pressed closer, tentatively at first, but with more confidence as the kiss went on. He reached up and slid his fingers through the strands of hair on the back of Byers' head.

Jonathan's hair wasn't cool, but it was nice. It was silky smooth, not crunchy with hairspray like Steve's. It also *smelled* nice, like dollar store strawberry shampoo. Steve couldn't get enough of it.

Jonathan hummed quietly as he tilted his head back to the other side, so his nose was resting against Steve cheek. He curled his hands behind Steve's back and held on.

Steve debated with himself for a moment if he should do what he was thinking about doing or not. He braced himself and decided to go for it.

Steve swiped his tongue against Jonathan's bottom lip, and Jonathan froze. *Shit,* Steve thought, holding his breath for a few agonizing seconds.

Just as Steve was about to pull back and apologize, Jonathan timidly opened his mouth and responded in kind. Steve felt a wave of relief wash over him.

Steve deepened the kiss, and Jonathan came back with just as much

enthusiasm. Their pace picked up until they were almost frantic. They weren't the most coordinated, and the kiss had way too much spit and teeth, but it still so *good.*

Jonathan pulled away after a few minutes of this, breathing hard and staring at Steve with unfocused eyes. Steve blinked back at him, his mind foggy.

God, Jonathan had the prettiest eyes Steve had ever seen. They were brown, and the way the light reflected off them made his head swim.

Jonathan slowly slid his hands away from Steve's shoulders and took a step back. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and blindly smoothed down his mussed hair.

They stood around for a brief interlude, looking awkward. After a while, Jonathan cleared his throat and said, "So, uh. See ya."

Steve stared dumbly as Jonathan bent down to pick up his stuff. He secured his backpack straps over his shoulders and was just turning to leave when Steve piped up with a: "Wait."

Jonathan turned back around, and Steve said, "Do you want to do this… again?"

Jonathan hesitated for a moment, before nodding, and assuring, "Yeah. I'll leave a note in your locker."

Steve nodded back, and kept nodding, like some type of novelty bobblehead. Jonathan said bye again and Steve repeated it back. Then, he walked out.

When Steve was alone, he exhaled a long breath out and leaned against the support beams of the bleachers, a weird sense of giddiness bubbling in the pit of his stomach.

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Steve had started noticing Jonathan more.

It began with small, subtle things. But from there it escalated and got weird.
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Like on Tuesday, when Steve was making his way to baseball practice after school, and he happened to see Byers walk into the school darkroom. He had his bag slung over one shoulder and a jug of something in his hands.

Steve hadn't even realized they had a school darkroom, until he saw the sign on the door. He wondered if Jonathan took a lot of pictures. Steve had seen him carrying around a camera a couple of times in the past, but had never really thought that much about it.

Steve shrugged it off and kept walking.

On Wednesday, when he was at his locker in between 4th and 5th period, he'd seen Jonathan at his own locker across the hall, to the right.

Steve hadn't known that Jonathan's locker was so close to his, despite the fact that he switched his stuff three or four times a day. But there Byers was, only a few yards away from him.

Steve watched him grab his books, and move his backpack to the front so he could put away the things he had needed from his last class. When he was done, Jonathan swung his backpack back around and shut his locker door, giving the dial a spin and testing the lever to make sure it was really locked.

As Byers walked past him to get to his next class, Steve didn't acknowledge him and he didn't acknowledge Steve. It was kinda like it had always been, except a little bit more awkward.

On Thursday, during 7th, Steve was blankly staring at the teacher as he rambled on about the mitochondria. Without even really meaning to, his eyes shifted to Jonathan, who was seated one row to the front and a few rows to right of Steve.

Jonathan seemed to be aptly paying attention to the lecture. He was even diligently taking notes, his gaze flickering from the teacher to his paper as he scribbled down the information.

Steve watched with mild interest, resting his cheek against his palm. He wondered how Jonathan managed to be such a good student when he was likely exhausted all the time, if the dark circles under his eyes were any indication.

He was probably really smart. While Byers didn't really volunteer himself to participate in class, he always knew the answer whenever he was called on.

Ironically, it was at that moment that Steve heard his name being said, in that half-angry, half-exasperated way teachers say your name when they've tried to get your attention more than once.

Steve sat up in his chair, and asked the teacher to repeat the question, just as Jonathan turned his head and looked at him with those brown eyes of his.

Steve asked the teacher to repeat the question just one more time.

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On Friday, Steve really started to feel like a creep.

Let me explain.

So the day had just ended, right, and Steve was walking from his 8th period classroom to his car so he could drive home, right? And he just happened to see Jonathan walking a little ways ahead of him.

So Steve thought to ask him about an English assignment, because Jonathan seemed to be the type of guy who would know how to start a rhetorical analysis essay. And so, he decided to catch up to him.

But just as Steve was about to slide up to Jonathan, oozing charm, the latter made a sharp right turn and stepped off the sidewalk and onto the grass.

Now, this was odd, because the only thing in the direction that Jonathan was headed was the patch of woods behind the school. And last time Steve checked, the parking lot, where Jonathan's car was stationed, was on the opposite side.
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Steve, interest piqued, watched Jonathan fade into the treeline like he was Bigfoot in the grainy footage they play on TV.

He stood there on the sidewalk for a moment, chewing his bubblegum and thinking, before he decided it was absolutely *imperative* that he follow Jonathan into the forest, not because he was curious about what Byers was doing, but because the question about the English essay could *not* wait until tomorrow, thank you very much.

So, Steve strayed off the sidewalk and made a beeline for the woods, walking at first but picking up the pace in the final few yards. He kept jogging until the branches above him blocked out the sun, bathing the area in a dim light.

He scanned for Jonathan, but found no sight of him from his current vantage point. Steve blew out a sigh, swooped back his hair, and ventured deeper into the trees.

Everything was quieter in the forest. Aside from the occasional bird call or branch rustle, there was no noise to speak of. That, and the fact that it was dark in the afternoon, made the whole place kind of unnerving.

It did seem to be the type of place where Jonathan Byers would hang out alone, though.

Five minutes in, pine pitch was already sticking to Steve's shoes, and there was still no sign of Jonathan. Steve was just about to call off the mission as a lost cause when he finally spotted him.

Jonathan was squatting by a bush, a Pentax camera in his hands and a strap slung over his neck. He didn't notice Steve as he focused the lens on a particular leaf, wound the reel, and pressed down on the shutter button with his index finger.

Jonathan pulled back, and then took a few steps backward, examining his surroundings with an intense look on his face. He slowly turned until his back was to Steve and raised his camera up to his face again.

Jonathan looked radically different out here taking pictures than he did in school. He wasn't curled in on himself or awkwardly hunched over. He wasn't warily looking around or staring at his feet. He was just… calm, like he hadn't a worry in the world.

And anyone could see how much he cared about his camera. He was so careful with it. He always kept at least one hand on it so that it didn't bang against his chest, and each of his movements with it were slow and purposeful.

Steve wondered if he and Jonathan could ever be actual friends.

Now, this may be hard to believe, but Steve didn't have many friends. Or any friends at all. Sure, there were a lot of people he knew, and a lot of people who liked him, so he never had any trouble finding a place to sit at lunch. But as far as people to hang out with outside of school, or people who actually cared about him? He had no one.

But maybe he and Jonathan weren't meant to be friends.

Golden rays of sunlight fell through gaps in the leaves and splayed out against the forest floor. From where he was standing, Steve could see Jonathan smile slightly as he aimed his camera to take the perfect shot.

Here, Jonathan Byers was in his element. And Steve felt like a real creepshow, watching him like this. It was like he was spying on something sacred and private.

So he turned on his heel and left, and didn't stop walking until the harsh light of day was shining directly into his eyes and making him squint.

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A few days passed. Steve had been cutting across the school's courtyard to get to the parking lot when he first heard the voices, coming from a secluded area behind the school.

"Quit being such a bitch and hand over the cash," yelled an unidentified male.
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Steve rolled his eyes and kept walking, his expensive sneakers thudding against the sidewalk.

“What, did you spend all your money on blowjobs from dudes? Or are you just too poor to have any in the first place,” came a second voice, followed by a chorus of laughter and jeers.

While the comments made his blood boil, Steve just needed to focus on getting to his car and getting home. Reminding himself that it was none of his business, and the less he got involved, the better, he grit his teeth and stamped on.

“What, cat got your tongue, Byers? You’re such a fag.”

Steve felt his stomach drop and stopped cold in his tracks. He took a deep breath, and grimaced to himself.

Of course it was Byers. This shit happened to him all the time.

He heard the muffled laughter again, followed by another biting insult, but this time, each word cut straight to his core.

Let it be, Steve. It’s not your shit to deal with.

“What’s that you got around your neck, huh?”

Steve’s eyes widened in realization, and before he could even think, he found himself doing a 180 and sprinting, full throttle, in the direction of the voices.

When Steve turned the corner, he saw a group of about five or six kids, both boys and girls, huddled in a circle around one very exasperated Jonathan Byers. The guy who appeared to be the ringleader of the shitshow, Vick Garnham, was holding Jonathan’s camera in one hand, strap dangling. He had apparently wrestled it from around Jonathan’s neck.

“You like to take secret pictures with this, Byers? Prolly so you can jack off to them later, you perv,” Vick taunted, earning hollers from the group.

“Just give it back…” Jonathan murmured, the first words he had

uttered throughout this whole ordeal. His eyes were wide and trained on the precious camera in Vick's hands.

"Or what, Byers? What are you gonna do?" The asshole twirled the camera around by the strap, and Steve could see Jonathan's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

Vick finally turned his head to the side, and took notice of Steve. It was like a switch had been flipped.

"Oh, 'sup Steve. What's goin' on?" Vick said casually, still swinging the camera around. Jonathan was almost deathly pale, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Vick was the shortstop on Steve's baseball team, and they got along relatively well, despite the fact that Steve had always thought he was annoying. They even sat together at lunch sometimes, along with a couple of other guys from the team.

"Give him back the camera, Vick," Steve deadpanned without preamble. Vick stopped the swinging and carelessly let the camera fall, the strap catching it when it was about an inch from the ground. Steve swore he could hear Jonathan's gasp.

"What?" Vick asked, genuinely confused. Before then, Steve had always been completely chill about whatever shit Vick got up to with his friends.

"Just give it back," Steve repeated, raising his voice slightly, trying to make his tone as commanding as possible.

Vick blinked at Steve, and then at Jonathan, and then at Steve again, before he barked out a bitter laugh.

"You're joshin' me, man. You can't be fuckin' serious."

"Don't make this a big deal, Vick," Steve replied, running his hand through his hair with forced nonchalance. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, already starting to feel sweat prick up on the back of his neck.

This was probably the first time someone had ever told Vick to knock

it off. Every time he decided to pull bullshit like this, he was met with a crowd of fans and a quick surrender. What Steve was doing was unprecedented.

Vick stared at Steve for a second, eyes hard, before scoffing again. “Oh, fuck off, Steve. Suddenly you’re some knight in shining armor for this waistoid? You never gave a shit before,” he sneered.

Steve gulped, and a thought flickered to the forefront of his mind. *Yeah, what the fuck am I doing?* But it was gone as quickly as it came. Steeling his resolve, he demanded the camera back for a third time.

“What, are you his loverboy or something? You just as much a fag as Byers?” Vick chaffed, more for a response from the group than for an actual answer from Steve.

Steve felt his pulse drumming at the speed of light, but kept his voice as measured as he could. “Quit being a dickhead, Vick. Come on.”

“Or what, Steve? Or what,” Vick challenged, letting go of the camera strap. The camera landed with a clatter, thankfully close enough to the ground to take minimal damage.

Steve opened his mouth and then closed it, clenched and unclenched his fists. “Or…” he began.

“Or nothing, Steve. You’re just as much of a pussy as Byers here.” As Vick said the name, he turned back around to the suck-ups he called his friends.

“Hold back his arms,” he ordered, and before Jonathan could even react he was pinned by two of the boys, completely immobilized no matter how much he struggled and spat. Vick approached him, and Steve watched his every step, time slowing to a crawl.

“Now, for the last time,” Vick said, eerily calm as he raised his fist, “Give me your fucking money.” He brought it down, hard, on the side of Byer’s face, just to prove that he could. The sound of flesh hitting flesh resonated in the air.

Steve saw white. His feet carried him forward and he watched his knuckles make contact with Vick’s ear, watched as his head snapped

to the side.

Vick whirled around, his expression more surprised than pained. Wide-eyed, he rasped, “You son of a bitch,” before he lunged, teeth bared with rage.

Steve ducked under his right-hook, adrenalin pulsing through his veins, and came back up with a solid punch to Vick’s nose. Instantly, he could see blood start to trickle from one of his nostrils.

Steve had never been in a real fight before. He didn’t even know the basics of fighting, really, other than to keep his thumbs on the outside and try not to get hit.

He could vaguely hear screams and cheers from the kids around them, as Vick retaliated with a jab that grazed Steve’s cheek but didn’t quite connect.

Steve got in one good hit, two good hits to Vick’s face, his knuckles throbbing, and thought for a second, *Wait, am I actually winning this?*

But that was before Vick brought back a hard blow that made contact directly with Steve’s jaw, knocking him off his feet. He felt the back of his head slam against the concrete, and then, before he could even blink, Vick was down on him like a ton of bricks.

Vick placed his knees squarely on Steve’s chest, pinning him down against the ground and rendering him incapable of getting air into his lungs. And then he fucking wailed on him, slamming punch after punch upside his head until his vision was swimming.

Steve tried to wrestle out from under him, but the hits just kept coming, one after the other until blackness started to creep around the edges of everything he could see, enveloping him in nothingness. The only escape from the pain was when he finally, blissfully slipped into unconsciousness.

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Steve awoke hours later, completely disoriented, his entire body throbbing in agony. He struggled to remember what happened and where he was, and it took him a moment before it came rushing back
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to him.

The first thing he registered was that he was in a bed, and not on the cold concrete ground outside the school like he expected.

The next thing he noticed was that he couldn't see shit. One eye was almost completely swollen shut, he figured, while the other was pressed against something hard and cool. An ice pack?

He groaned, and tried to move one of his heavy limbs, before he felt something shift next to him.

"Try to keep still."

Steve felt the panic start to set in as he realized he wasn't alone. His breathing picked up as he desperately attempted to open his eye, to see who the fuck he was with.

The ice pack moved away from his face, and Steve blinked back the blurriness to find that he was in a home that was not his home.

And sitting before him, on a bed that was not his bed, was Jonathan Byers, a nasty purple bruise spread out on the side of his face.

Jonathan moved the ice pack he was holding to Steve's other eye.

"Where am I?" Steve garbled, sounding like his mouth was filled with syrup.

"My house," Jonathan replied, his eyes trained on Steve's as he focused.

Steve kept silent for a moment, waiting for Jonathan to explain, but the latter kept predictably tight-lipped. So Steve croaked, "Why am I at your house?"

Jonathan gave him a look, before pointing out the obvious. "Because I brought you here."

Steve watched Jonathan for a short while with mild confusion as he finished up with the ice pack and then leaned over to put it away in what appeared to be a First-Aid kit.

“You look pretty bad, man,” Jonathan muttered when he turned back around.

Steve glared, as best as he could with two swollen eyes. “Thanks.”

“I mean it. You look like you picked a fight with a charging rhinoceros.”

Steve tried not to smile at the visual, and at how impassive Jonathan sounded as he said it.

They fell into a borderline uncomfortable silence, Jonathan messing with a loose thread on one of the sheets and Steve lying there watching him because that was kinda all he could do.

Steve cleared his throat, and Jonathan glanced down at him. He asked, “How’s your camera?”

Jonathan blinked, as if he was surprised by the question. He replied, “It’s fine.”

Steve hummed and nodded, relieved. He rested his eyes, and all was quiet for a few beats.

Steve wondered what Byers had ever done to them, to warrant the hell he went through all the time. Sure, he was kind of a loner, but was that really a reason to corner him and take his most prized possession? To hold back his arms and hit him?

Steve broke the silence with a bitter, “Why do they do that shit to you?”

He heard Jonathan exhale a long breath of air. Then, his soft voice. “Because I’m a freak.”

Steve opened his eyes again, frowned up at Byers, and said, with finality, “I think they’re dumb as shit.”

Byers didn’t respond, but Steve thought he saw his lips twitch, just a little bit.

They just hung out there for a few minutes, and Steve was toying

with the idea of passing out again to quiet the unbearable throbbing in his skull when Jonathan spoke up.

“That really wasn’t that bright of an idea. Those pricks usually go away if you just ignore them,” Jonathan told him quietly. “You didn’t have to punch Vick like that.”

Unbeknownst to Steve, while he was unconscious, Jonathan had picked him up off the ground and carried him to his clunker of a car, careful not to disturb any of his injuries as he buckled him in.

He had driven Steve to his house, avoiding all the potholes and making sure all of his stops were slow and smooth.

After he gingerly laid him on his bed, he cleaned the cuts on Steve’s face with a cotton ball and rubbing alcohol, smeared them with Neosporin, and covered each of them with a rainbow Band-Aid.

Now, Jonathan looked Steve in the eyes as best he could, considering the circumstances, and spoke with the utmost sincerity.

“But thank you for doing it.”

Even though the fight resulted in Steve totally, thoroughly getting his ass handed to him, he kinda felt like he won.